

# Children in the Marketplace

Professor Simon Kistemaker

Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Missouri, U.S.A.

(Matthew 11:16-19; Luke 7: 31-35)

Jesus told a delightful parable of children playing in the marketplace. He took the scene directly from daily life, a familiar sight of children making up their own plays and acting them out. The little drama could very well have unfolded as follows.

Several boys and girls were playing together in the marketplace, most likely when it was not in use. Some of the children wanted to play a wedding. Beside the bride and groom, a flute player was needed, as were a number of children to dance at the wedding. Though bride and groom were ready and one of the children provided the wedding music on his flute, the rest of the children refused to dance. They were not interested in playing a wedding. Next, some of the children wanted to act out a funeral. One of them had to play the dead person, while others sang a dirge. The rest had to mourn – but they refused. They had no desire to be part of that funeral game. The children who had planned the games sat down and called out to the others:

We played the flute for you,  
and you did not dance;  
We sang a dirge,  
and you did not mourn.

## Application

According to Matthew's Gospel, the children sitting in the marketplace call out to others, their playmates. In the Gospel of Luke, the children are calling out to each other. In Matthew's presentation one group of children is creative and suggests two different games to another group.<sup>1</sup> Luke's account gives the impression that one group of children wanted to play a happy game, while the other group decided on a sad one. Neither group desired to follow the suggestion of the other. It may also be that the taunts made by only the one group have been recorded,<sup>2</sup> and that the use of "each other" should not be pressed unduly.

But how is the parable applied? Basically there are two ways of applying the scene which Jesus described. First, the children who suggest the wedding and the funeral games represent Jesus and John the Baptist, respectively. The children who refuse to participate in these games are the Jews, John came to them and struck a dirgelike note, but they were in no mood to listen to him. To get rid of John they said he was possessed. Jesus, however, came and brought joy and happiness in numerous ways; the Jews sneered at him because he entered the homes of moral and social outcasts, where he ate and drank with them.

**God had sent his messengers in the persons of John and Jesus, but their contemporaries did nothing but find fault with them.**

The second interpretation is the reverse of the first. That is, the children who suggest the glad and sad games of the wedding and funeral are the Jews who want John to be merry and Jesus to mourn. When neither lives up to their expectations, they complain. They say to John, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance." And they say to Jesus, "We sang a dirge, and you did not mourn."<sup>3</sup>

*We are pleased to publish an excerpt from Professor Simon Kistemaker's book Parables of Jesus published by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan.*



Of the two, the second explanation is the more plausible. First, it establishes a definite link between "the people of this generation" (Luke 7:31) and the children who make the reproaches. The Jews are displeased with both John the Baptist and Jesus, just as the children are with their playmates. And second, it places the complaints of the children applied to John and Jesus in a chronological order.<sup>4</sup> John came as a ascetic who lived on locusts and wild honey – eating bread and drinking wine was not for him – and the Jews accused him of being demon-possessed. Jesus, by contrast, ate bread and drank wine, and they branded him a glutton and drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." God had sent his messengers in the persons of John and Jesus, but their contemporaries did nothing but find fault with them.

## Parallels

The games the children wanted to play and their subsequent reproaches find an echo in the Book of Ecclesiastes, which has a section of poetry that observes there is a time for everything. There is "a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance" (Eccles 3:4), says the Preacher.

**Jesus' association with social and moral outcasts, who were regarded as apostates by the religious leaders, was considered reprehensible.**

The taunt which the Jews hurled at Jesus, however, was by no means harmless name-calling. They accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. This was the description of an unruly son who, according to the Mosaic law, ought to be stoned to death (Deuteronomy 21:20, 21) Jesus' association with social and moral outcasts, who were regarded as apostates by the religious leaders, was considered reprehensible. Because of his association, the Jews felt that he himself was to be regarded as an apostate.<sup>5</sup>

In rabbinic literature, a striking parallel appears. Though it is difficult to ascertain when this parallel was written and where it originated in oral form, the wording itself is interesting:

Jeremiah spoke right up to the Holy One, blessed be He: Thou didst bring it about that the curly-haired Elijah rose to act in their behalf and they laughed at him saying: "Behold how he curls his locks!" and sneeringly called him "the curly-haired fellow." And when Thou didst bring it about that Elisha rose to act in their behalf, they said

*Continued on page 15*

- iii) to encourage evangelicals to get involved actively with LIFE
- iv) to foster these aims by organising and promoting conferences, speakers, articles, leaflets, books and films.

Our raison d'être is to get Bible believers working within the local Groups and organisations of LIFE. Many, it is true, were – and some still are – reluctant to join an association like LIFE that is not thoroughly church-based and Biblical. Some believers have found it difficult existing in the environment of the few Roman Catholic dominated local LIFE Groups. Qualms about raffles and lotteries as means of raising money to keep the local Groups viable are occasionally produced. But what are the alternatives? Ignore the abortion problem and forget the unborn children? The answer is to recruit more members from your fellowship into your local LIFE Group and explain your reservations about finances and covenant instead! Within any LIFE Group you will find cobelligerents from all walks of life – it will be an eye-opener for many.

---

**the believer, with the Scriptures in hand and the love of Christ in heart, should have been in the forefront saying 'No' to abortion and doing all possible to help women avoid its horrors.**

---

The input from evangelicals during the past three years has been considerable – it has been one of the major growth areas of LIFE. Several evangelicals now sit on Central Committee, the national policy making body. A pleasing number of believers now hold office or even chair LIFE Groups, many are becoming increasingly involved in the pregnancy care services, Christian's homes are being opened to needy pregnant mums and many hundreds of our folk are busy in lots of other LIFE activities. We have been given every encouragement to operate within LIFE; we have surrendered no principle nor set aside any conviction. The challenge is out – Evangelicals for LIFE will make it easier and more hospitable for you to work in the pro-life cause.

The great need among evangelicals is still for education. What do the Scriptures say concerning abortion? When does human life begin? What does the Warnock Report mean? How can we care for the mother and her unborn child? Evangelicals for LIFE can help your fellowship tackle these and other questions. We now have a considerable number of well-informed speakers throughout the U.K. We are willing to come and speak, perhaps show a film and bring literature to aid you. For more information, including a copy of the latest Newsletter, write to Evangelicals for LIFE, 118-120 Warwick Street, Leamington Spa, Warks, CV32 4QY.

#### USEFUL BOOKLETS

*Abortion – a Matter of Life and Death*, 1981, Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

Gordon Wenham and Richard Winter, *Abortion – the Biblical and Medical Challenges*, 1983, CARE Trust.

Peter Barnes, *Open Your Mouth for the Dumb*, 1984, Banner of Truth Trust.

Huw Morgan *Let Them Live!*, 1985, Evangelical Press.

*Continued from page 12*

derisively to him: "Go up, thou baldhead; go up, thou baldhead."<sup>6</sup>

#### Conclusion

The culmination of this parable differs in the two Gospel accounts. Matthew's and Luke's accounts vary in the concluding phrase, "But wisdom is proved right by her actions" (Matt. 11:19), and "But wisdom is proved right by all her children" (Luke 7:35). The suggestion has been made that the difference in wording may go back to an Aramaic expression which in translation was misunderstood.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the cause may be, the meaning which the words convey does not vary. Wisdom represents God's wisdom; it may even be a circumlocution for God himself. According to Matthew, the divine works of Jesus (Matt 11:5) are proofs of God's wisdom. In Luke's Gospel, God's children are a testimony to the veracity of his wisdom. For example, tax collectors and immoral women, rejected as outcasts by religious people of their day, saw in John the Baptist and in Jesus the wisdom of God revealed. Both John and Jesus proclaimed the message of redemption to them – John in all austerity at the Jordan (Luke 3:12, 13) and Jesus in table-fellowship at their homes (Luke 5:30).

#### Notes

1. Jeremias, in *Parables* p. 161, follows the suggestion made by Bishop, in *Jesus of Palestine*, p. 104. Jeremias writes: "That some children were sitting perhaps implies that they were content with 'piping' or 'wailing', leaving the more strenuous exercises for the others." However, there is a real danger of reading too much into the text at this point.
2. Marshall, *Luke*, p. 300.
3. F. Mussner, in "Dernichterkannte Kairos (Matt. 11 vs. 16-19; Luke 7 vs. 31-35)," *Biblica* 40 (1959): 600, pictures all the children sitting down and calling out
4. A. Plummer, *The Gospel of Luke (ICC)*, p. 163.
5. Matt. 9 vs. 11; Luke 5 vs. 30; 15 vs. 1-2; 19 vs. 7.
6. Piska 26, in W. G. Braude, *Pesikta Rabbati*, 2 vols. 1:5 26-27. Also see Strack – Billerbeck: *Kommentar*.
7. *Jeremias, Parables*, p. 162, n. 44.

---

*Continued from page 13*

mainly in the Co. Down area of the province and were proving an embarrassment to denominational loyalties. One of the chief characteristics of the movement was the pronounced activity of "shepherds" whose role was to oversee individual members of the fellowship. The problem certainly afforded major denominations the opportunity to have a long hard look at their structures and to gauge whether these were sufficiently warm in fellowship, attractive in aspect and relevant in caring. The removal of these fellowships from the Methodist denomination, with whom they had been chiefly linked, however, has meant that the problem has receded. 1985 provided the "tidying up" reflection necessary and beneficial after such an issue.

One subject discussed at the Church of Ireland Synod was that of the place of the child in the Church. With a report before the General Assembly due for discussion in 1986 on that very subject we might well see the whole question of the significance of infant baptism and the child and communion come to prominence.

How much of all this finds its way to the pew is certainly debateable. However, the strong expository and theological emphasis in the province can only have a good influence on the life of the Church. And we pray that this will continue to be the case. As ever, evangelicalism could be more vital in Northern Ireland but there are indications of its presence and importance. The growing biblical emphases within it gives great hope for the future.